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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000673

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PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: BIOGRAPHICAL DATA ON SYRIA'S NEW MINISTERS

REF: DAMASCUS 00601

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: President Bashar al-Asad appointed eleven new ministers with portfolio and three new state ministers without portfolio on February 11. The following includes basic biographical (and previously unavailable) data on new appointees. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) MINISTER OF THE INTERIOR: General Bassam Abdul Majid, a member of Syria's small Circassian community and a Sunni Muslim, was born in Bir Ajam in Quneitra Province in ¶1950. He graduated from the Air Force Academy in 1970. During his career, he has occupied a number of military and security posts, including a stint as Chief of Military Security Damascus Branch. Prior to his appointment as Interior Minister, he had served as Commander of the Military Police since January 1, 2003.

¶3. (C) According to an Embassy contact, Abdul Majid is intelligent, with an interest in IT, and had a falling out with then-SMI deputy head Asif Shawkat. He is thought to be close to Maher al-Asad, the President's brother. Several contacts pointed to his appointment as a sign that Shawkat's relations with Bashar and Maher may have deteriorated. Another contact said that the security services felt Bashar had frozen them out of the selection process for the new cabinet, refusing to appoint any of the names they had put forward, because of suspicions about Shawkat's influence. One contact, perhaps reflecting this animus from elements in the security services, said that Abdul Majid had a reputation for corruption, although another contact dismissed that charge as unfounded rumor. A contact in the human rights community described Abdul Majid as "good and honest," a reputation built among civil society activists in their interactions with him during his SMI stint.

¶4. (C) INFORMATION MINISTER: Dr. Mohsen Bilal, from a prominent Alawite family, was born in Burghalieh in Tartous Province in 1944. He studied medicine at the University of Padua in Italy and graduated 1970. He completed surgical training in Italy in 1976. He completed a Ph.D. in medicine and surgery at University of Pennsylvania, specializing in liver transplantation. Bilal holds long-standing Ba'th Party connections. His political career began as a Member of Parliament in 1977; from 1981-1985 he served as Chairman of the Arab and Foreign Affairs Committee. He was appointed as Syria's ambassador to Spain in 2001, serving there until his appointment as Information Minister. Contacts describe him as sophisticated, with good connections in Europe and the U.S. He has no previous experience in media relations, according to contacts, who expressed divided views about how effective he would be in office.

15. (C) MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION: Dr. Ghiath Barakat was born in 1953 in Deir az-Zor but spent most of his life in-- and considers himself to be from-- Idlib. He completed his Ph.D. in Education and Linguistics at the University of Texas in 1985. Contacts differ about whether he is Sunni or Alawite. Barakat's professional career began in 1978 as head of Scholarships Department at the Regional Education Bureau. Following the completion of his Ph.D. he worked as a Professor at Aleppo University and Director of the Center for Teaching Languages from 1986 to 2000. He was later also named the Chairman of the Aleppo Branch of the Syrian Computer Society, a state-run ISP. Barakat has also had a successful political career in the Ba'th Party. While teaching at Aleppo University, he also served as a member of the Aleppo University Branch Command of the Ba'th Party. In 2000, he became a member of the Ba'th Party Regional Command, serving as Chairman of the Bureau for Higher Education and Academic Research. In 2005, he was named a member of the Ba'th Party Central Committee.

16. (C) MINISTER OF PETROLEUM AND MINERAL RESOURCES: Sufian Allaw was born in Boukamal, located on the border with Iraq, in 1944. He is thought to be Sunni. He completed a Bachelor's in Mechanical and Electrical Engineering at Aleppo University. Allaw began his career as an engineer at the Telecommunications Establishment in 1966. From 1976 to 1980, he served as the director of the General Establishment of the Euphrates Dam. From 1980 to 1983 he worked as an Engineer at the Ministry of Irrigation, later moving to the Prime Minister's Office for Energy Affairs for a one year stint as an engineer. Allaw served as Assistant Minister of Electricity from 1984 to 2004, and later as an advisor at the State Planning Commission from 2004 to 2005. Contacts note that while Allaw served competently as the former Deputy Minister of Electricity, he is reportedly not very familiar with the oil industry.

17. (C) MINISTER OF CULTURE: Dr. Riad Na'san Agha was born in 1947 in Idlib. He is thought to be Sunni. He completed a B.A. in literature at Damascus University, and later completed a Ph.D. in Philosophy. He began his career as a teacher of Arabic literature. Agha, a playwright and reputed to be a traditional Ba'thist, then went on to serve as Director of Programming and Drama Productions, as well as Deputy General Manager of Syrian TV and Radio. In 1990, Agha was elected to the People's Assembly. He later went on to serve as Director of the Political Affairs Office at the Presidency, advising Bashar. He served as Syrian Ambassador to Oman, and, immediately preceding his appointment as Minister of Culture, to the United Arab Emirates.

18. (C) MINISTER OF ELECTRICITY: Dr. Ahmad Khaled al-Ali was born in 1950 in Homs. Contacts believe that he is Alawite but could not rule out a Sunni background. He completed a B.S. in Electronic engineering at Damascus University. From 1974 to 1976, he helped to establish the Scientific Studies and Research Center (SSRC). In 1982 he completed a Ph.D. in Arbitration and Multi-handling of signals at a U.K. university. He remained in the U.K. to work from 1982 to 1984. Ali has spent most of his career working in Syria's state-owned utilities sector and is considered a technocrat by observers, although one contact questioned whether he was really knowledgeable in the field. Immediately prior to appointment as Minister of Electricity, he served from 2002 onwards as Director General of the General Establishment for Generating and Transferring Electricity.

19. (C) MINISTER OF HOUSING AND CONSTRUCTION: Hammoud al-Hussein, a Sunni Muslim, was born in Hama in 1957. He graduated from Aleppo University with a B.S. in Civil Engineering in 1980. He completed a Masters in Environmental Engineering in 2005. According to press reports, he has spent most of his career at the General Establishment for Water and Sewage in Hama beginning in 1988, serving most recently as Director General. According to contacts, his primary qualification for the position is that he is a Sunni from Hama.

¶10. (C) MINISTER OF TRANSPORT: Yarub Suleiman Badr, an Alawite, was born in Damascus in 1959. He completed a Bachelor's degree in civil engineering from Aleppo University in 1982. In 1991, he completed a Ph.D. at the Paris National School for Bridges and Roads. Badr began his professional career as a full time teacher at University of Tishreen in the Civil Engineering Faculty, Department of Communication and Transport Engineering, in the coastal town of Lattakia. He later served as an advisor on transport planning at the State Planning Commission. He also served as Syria's representative to the Higher Committee formed by the EU to discuss the expansion of the European transport network to neighboring countries. He is reportedly a close friend of Asad cousin and business mogul Rami Makhlouf.

¶11. (C) MINISTER OF INDUSTRY: Dr. Fuad Issa Jouni, a Christian, was born in 1950 in Homs. In 1975, he completed a Bachelor's in Mechanical Engineering in Egypt. In 1978, he completed a postgraduate diploma in mining at a British university. In 1979, he completed a Master's in applied mining physics at a British University, and completed a Ph.D. at the University of Sheffield in 1983. He later worked as a lecturer at the Asad Academy for Military Engineering, as well as a postgraduate lecturer at Aleppo University. From 1984 to 1991, he worked as a researcher at the Scientific Studies and Research center.

¶12. (C) MINISTER OF COMMUNICATIONS AND TECHNOLOGY: Dr. Amr Salem, a Sunni, was born in 1958 in Damascus. He completed a degree in computer engineering at a Swiss university in 1982, going on to complete a Ph.D. in computer engineering in 1992. He worked as a computer programmer and later as Director of Programming at a Swiss IT company. In 1992, he was a founding member of the Syrian Computer Society. From 1998 to 2005, he served as Director of Programming at Microsoft in Seattle. Amr is a U.S. green card holder. Late in 2005, he became a special advisor to Bashar al-Asad. Some observers believe that serving as a minister will decrease Salem's influence, as he gives up his role as personal advisor to Bashar.

¶13. (U) THREE NEW MINISTERS OF STATE: Three new Ministers of State without portfolio were also appointed, rperesenting small political parties from among the Ba'th-dominated ruling coalition, the National Progressive Front (NPF): Mahmoud Farzat (Arab Socialist Movement); Joseph Suweit (Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party); and Hassan as-Sari (Socialist Unionist Party).

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